



WEEK FIVE: PROSTRATIONS

This week we'd like to look at another very common Tibetan Buddhist practice. If you have ever lived among Tibetans, you know that making prostrations is a basic part of our lives. Average Tibetans don't really know the Buddhist beliefs behind prostrating, but the practice is something that is commonly taught to us as children by our parents.

Video: Learn How to Prostrate

Why do we Prostrate?

By prostrating, we are seeking to purify our delusions, negativities and our bad karma. His Holiness teaches us that as long as we humans suffer from delusions, we are making bad karma – intentionally and unintentionally – all the time, from morning to night. To counteract our bad actions, one thing we can do is to engage in wholesome spiritual practices, like reciting mantras, or making offerings or prostrations.



Prostrating at the Chokpori Medicine Buddha area on the Lhasa Lingkhor.

In the case of making prostrations, we can both purify some of our negativities and generate merit. We can multiply these benefits by doing more prostrations. This is why in Tibet there is a long history of pilgrims prostrating for long distances, sometimes for many hundreds of miles, usually with the final destination of a very holy site, like the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa.

When and Where Should You Make Prostrations?

We will share with you the general Tibetan habits about prostrating, but you should know that the decision to prostrate or not in a particular situation is often made on a case-by-case basis, and often depends on practical factors like time and space. Different Tibetans will behave differently, too. So, as with all the practices we are exploring in this course, you will need to make a personal decision about what seems like the right thing to do at the moment.

- Tibetans traditionally prostrate on entering a temple or the shrine room of a monastery, nunnery or dharma center.
- When attending a teaching, we prostrate when our teacher enters and leaves the room, especially if the teacher is a high lama such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama.
- It is not common, on the other hand, to prostrate before the shrine at a friend's home if you are just visiting.
- It is common to wear kneepads to protect one's knees if doing a lot of prostrations :-)
- It's also common to use a square of cloth for your hands to slide on the floor more easily.
- Some people use a body-sized board to make prostrations on in the home if there is no smooth surface for making prostrations.

Regular Prostration Practices

We have Tibetan friends who have a daily habit of a certain number of prostrations, such as 100, and they do these in their homes, usually in front of the shrine if there is room there. Serious Tibetan Buddhist practitioners may engage in a regular prostration practice, often as a preparation – *ngondro* – for a long retreat. She or he might, for example, undertake to do 100,000 prostrations in preparation for a *lo sum da sum* (three years and three months) retreat, and would commonly do this at home. Undertaking *ngondro* practice is something you would commonly do with a teacher's guidance. On the other hand, anyone could choose to make a daily practice of prostrations.

How to Make Prostrations

Like many Tibetan Buddhist practices, prostrations can be done in a variety of ways, and there is not really a “wrong” way to do it if you have in your heart and mind a sincere motivation to rid yourself of wrong thinking and negativities.

There are three basic styles, which we show in the video above:

- *Gyangchag* – Full body prostration. In Tibetan the *gyang* refers to “reaching out” and *chag* is prostration.
- *Kumchag* – Partial prostration, where we prostrate from our knees. In Tibetan, *kum* refers to contracting your body, as opposed to reaching out.
- Symbolic prostration, with just the hand motions, which we do standing or sitting, often if there is not room to do a full body prostration, or if it is simply not practical for any reason. (We don’t know a Tibetan word for this.)



Tibetan man prostrating around the Barkhor, in Lhasa.

Each style includes the same basic hand motions at the beginning, which you can see in the video, of joining your hands and touching them to three places:

- *Ku* – Crown of your head – Body
- *Sung* – Mouth or throat – Speech
- *Thuk* – Heart – Mind

In this sequence, we are seeking to:

- Purify the bad karma caused by actions of the body and aspiring to all the good qualities of Buddha's body
- Purify the bad karma caused by our speech and aspiring to all the good qualities of Buddha's speech
- Purify the bad karma caused by our minds and aspiring to all the good qualities of Buddha's mind

It may be interesting for non-Tibetans to note that our hearts are associated with the mind, and the crown of our heads symbolizes the body!

Some Tibetans also add one more step in this sequence by touching their foreheads. Lama Zopa has offered a very rich teaching on the whole subject of prostrations, including this topic, at the FPMT Archives. As Lama Zopa notes, "In the teachings there is no specific advice to think such and such while prostrating..." but he offers some visualizations and prayers that would be good to do.

When I (Lobsang) was a monk, every morning I used to do about a hundred prostrations while reciting the *dungshag*, which is a confessional prayer to the thirty-five Buddhas. This prayer is too long to discuss here, but you can see Lama Zopa's teachings on it at the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive site.

You can always simply recite mantras while prostrating, or any of the common Tibetan prayers that you know. (You'll learn some common prayers next week.)

WEEK FIVE PRACTICE

For this week's practice, it's good to make prostrations with a mindset of purifying your negativities, and your bad karma, by using this wholesome spiritual activity.

Depending on your physical fitness and ability, you might try to begin by performing just a few prostrations each day this week, like 3 or 5. (There's no strict rule, but generally we won't do an even number, with the thought that we have not "completed" our practice.) If you are not physically able to do this, you can do the symbolic prostration we discuss in the lesson, or even just visualize doing it.

If you wish you can build on this base practice over time, if you're physically capable. Some people do over 100 prostrations a day, like 111, for example, but if you do this you will want to build up to it.

PRACTICE TOOLS FOR WEEK FIVE

- Handout: Mantra practice (Week 2)
- More handouts coming in Week 6: Common Prayers